

Smoke and Mirror: Reflection of an Urban Journalist

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To cite this article: Ben Higa (2012) Smoke and Mirror: Reflection of an Urban Journalist, Amerasia Journal, 38:1, 52-60, DOI: [10.17953/amer.38.1.81565828130pw28j](https://doi.org/10.17953/amer.38.1.81565828130pw28j)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.17953/amer.38.1.81565828130pw28j>



Published online: 08 Feb 2019.



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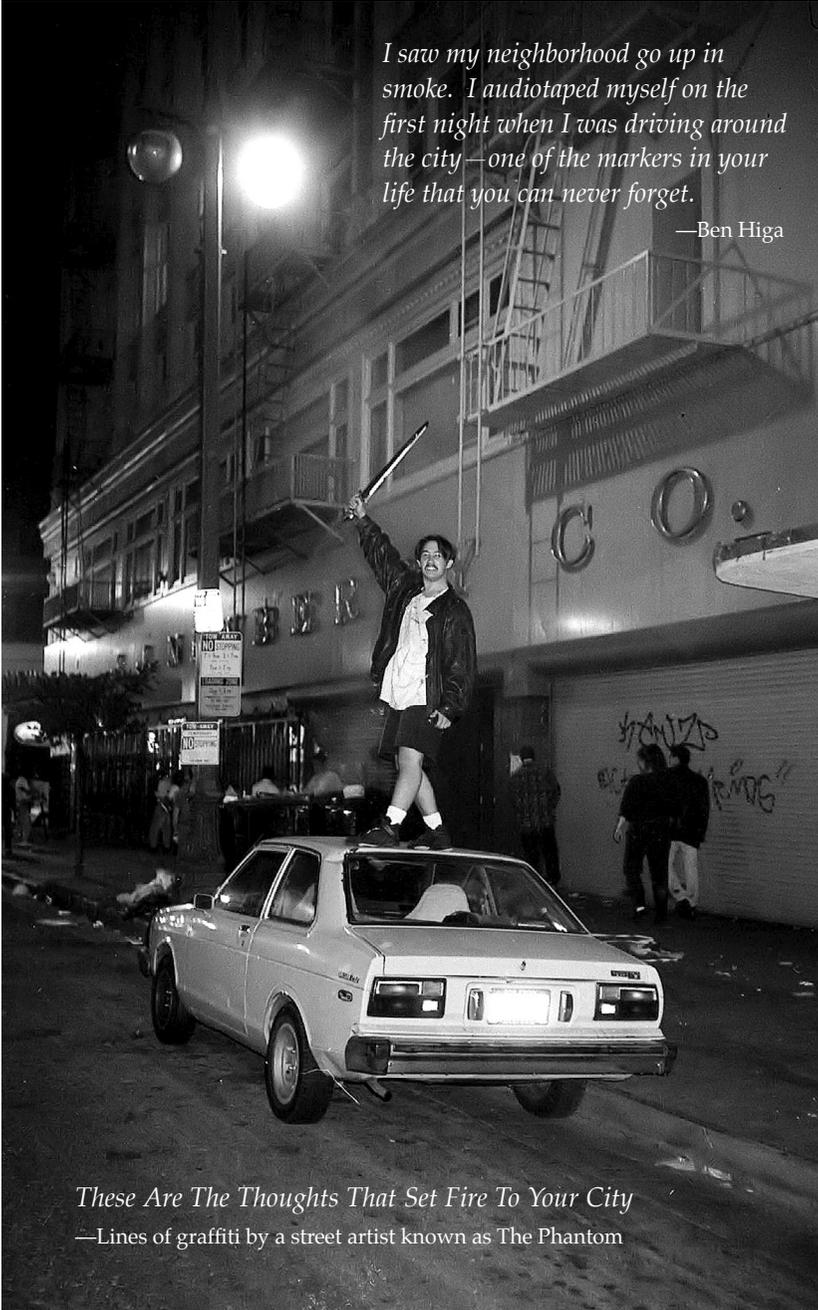
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I saw my neighborhood go up in smoke. I audiotaped myself on the first night when I was driving around the city—one of the markers in your life that you can never forget.

—Ben Higa



These Are The Thoughts That Set Fire To Your City
—Lines of graffiti by a street artist known as The Phantom

A protestor, who described himself as an Asian American, revels atop a parked car on the first night of April 29, 1992.

© Ben Higa, 1992

Smoke and Mirror:

Reflection of an Urban Journalist

Ben Higa

BEN HIGA has been a professional urban journalist since 1993. He has been documenting L.A. graffiti for over 25 years, as well as photographing social political movements and youth culture for the past 20 years. Higa received his B.A. in Journalism from California State University, Los Angeles. He is a second generation Japanese American who was born and raised in Los Angeles.

Throughout the years, a number of people have inquired about my work, especially my documentation of the events of April 29, 1992. I hope the following reflection will shed some light on the native son behind the Nikon. In 1991, I was enrolled as a journalism major at Cal State L.A. These were the years when my social consciousness was solidified through my work documenting some of the most tumultuous events within the last decade of the last millennium—all through the eyes of a journalist in training.

It was on the first floor of King Hall where I would witness the beginning of a new chapter in the history of Los Angeles. A crowd had gathered to watch the verdicts live on a school television monitor anchored to the ceiling over some vending machines. As the “not guilty” verdicts for the four LAPD officers were read, the crowd gasped with disbelief as a strange calm settled over it.

My mind flashed back to a television interview that I had seen months earlier. Not long before the Rodney King trial, a local news station ran what appeared to be a previously taped interview from the 1980s with Marquette Frye, a seminal figure in the Watts Unrest of 1965. I can clearly remember Frye looking at the camera and warning that the next civil unrest was going to be larger and more devastating than anyone could imagine. Frye, who had passed away in 1986 due to complications from pneumonia, foresaw the tensions brewing—once again—within South L.A.

Frye, no doubt, saw a relapse of the same festering conditions that set off the occurrences of that hot afternoon in '65. Poverty, racism, and the surging crack epidemic fueled gang-related activities a couple decades later. I can recall the weekly Monday



Aftermath: Burned out car and strip mall, across the street from a residential area that some people nicknamed “The Jungle.” The wall reads, “Black Power Jungle Riot 1992”

© Ben Higa, 1992

morning news giving the death tallies from the weekend gang wars, a media practice that went on for years as street violence reached epidemic proportions.

As a student at Los Angeles Senior High School, it was common to see gang activities in and outside the school grounds. Blacks had numerous Crip and Blood sets (cliques), Latinos claimed various local varrios, and Filipino gangsters claimed their pinoy alliances. All of the adolescent frustrations at the time were directed into a myriad of complex interethnic gang wars. The racial polarization among street syndicates hadn’t taken hold until later in the 1990s.

Growing up in the Mid-City district of L.A., I can recollect the transitional flux of the 1980s. The Mexican American as well as the Japanese American communities gave way for the arrival of a new generation of immigrants. Salvadorans, fleeing their native land during a time of deadly civil war and searching for a better life, and Koreans, seeking new opportunities in America, found themselves within the enclaves just west of downtown L.A. It wasn’t uncommon to see FMLN political graffiti scrawled throughout the inner



Variations of the phrase, "BLACK OWNED" appeared on businesses throughout L.A. Many non-blacks also wrote this on their stores hoping to save their businesses.

© Ben Higa, 1992



LAPD Sergeant Stacey Koon responds to media questions outside of the Edward R. Roybal Federal Building in downtown Los Angeles during the 1993 federal trial.

© Ben Higa, 1992

Federal trial of officers (from Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rodney_King)

After the riots, the United States Department of Justice reinstated the investigation and obtained an indictment of violations of federal civil rights against the four officers. The federal trial focused more on the evidence as to the training of officers instead of just relying on the videotape of the incident. On March 9 of the 1993 trial, King took the witness stand and described to the jury the events as he remembered them. The jury found Officer Laurence Powell and Sergeant Stacey Koon guilty, and they were subsequently sentenced to 30 months in prison, while Timothy Wind and Theodore Briseno were acquitted of all charges.



Aftermath: A burned out store in South L.A., 1992.

© Ben Higa, 1992

city, as well as noticing the sudden upsurge of Central American day laborers soliciting outside of Korean-owned businesses.

As Los Angeles was promoted as a melting pot of cultures, it was starting to be better described as a simmering boiling pot. The challenges of Los Angeles becoming a world-class city while being what author David Rieff would call “Capital of the Third World” were very evident. Cultures clashed, misunderstandings led to larger disputes, and confrontations between ethnic groups became even more apparent. As a native Angeleno, I found it was crucial that the ever-changing social landscape and the dynamics surrounding them needed to be documented—all of which would later become subjects of my work.

Although my photographic and journalistic endeavors have taken me down numerous narrow paths, many strenuous situations, and at times dangerous predicaments, the rewards were well worth it. The images that I have captured can now be preserved for future generations, as a historical testament to the neglected people, lives, and events that are very much part of the City of Los Angeles.







Memorial for Latasha Harlins at the Empire Market and Deli,
near the corner of 91st Place and Figueroa Street.

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